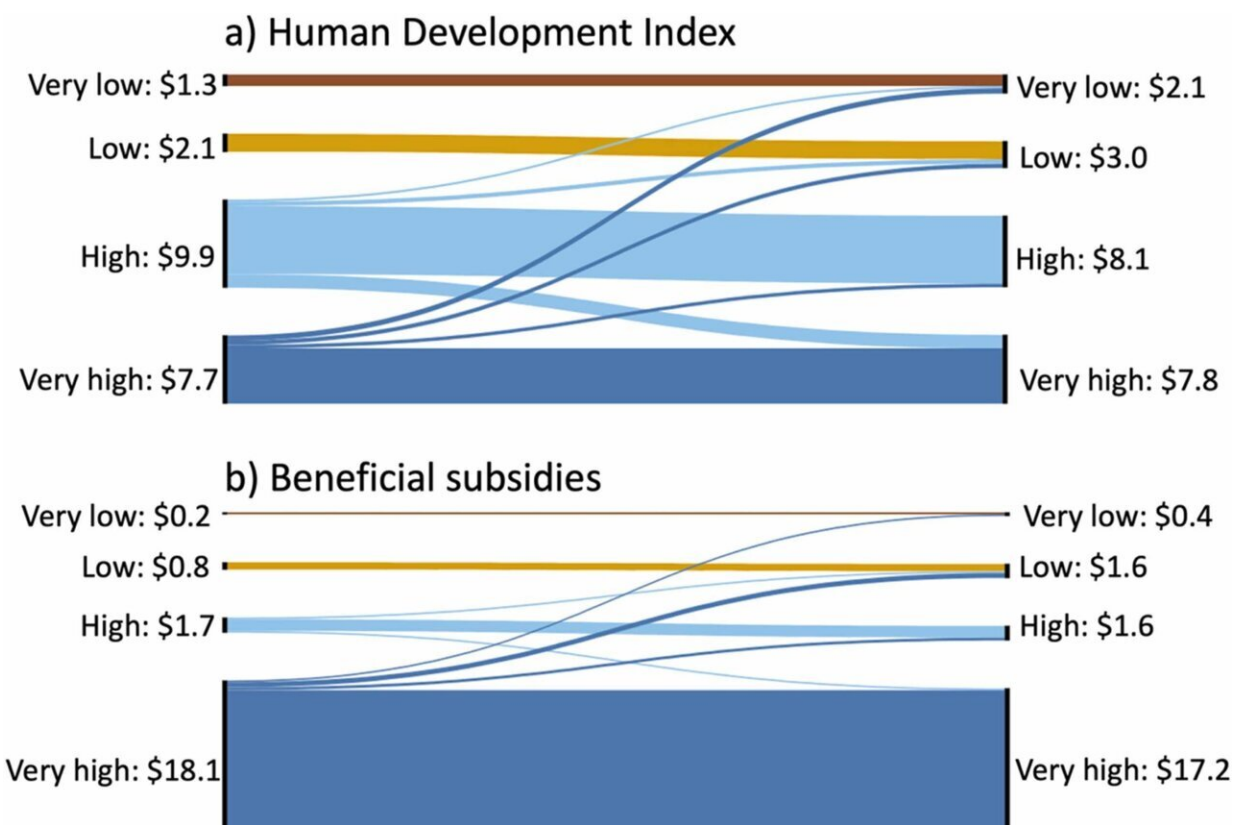


# Harmful fisheries subsidies are leading to more fishing vessels chasing fewer fish: Study

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The distribution of the provision (left axis) and net flow (right axis) of harmful fisheries subsidies in billion US\$. The total amount of harmful fisheries subsidies being provided by each nation and the total amount of domestic and foreign harmful fisheries subsidies estimated to be supporting fishing within each nation clustered as either very-high, high low, or very-low for; (a) the UN Human Development Index, (b) the amount of beneficial fisheries subsidies

provided, and (c) the 2020 Environmental Performance Indexes for relative fish stock status. Credit: *Marine Policy* (2023). DOI: 10.1016/j.marpol.2023.105611

Fish aren't impacted by borders, and neither are the subsidized fishing fleets that follow them.

A recent UBC study quantified the number of harmful fisheries subsidies that support fishing in the [high seas](#), domestic and foreign waters and found that between 20 and 37 percent of these subsidies supported fishing in waters outside the jurisdictions of their home nation; these subsidies also primarily originated from developed nations yet disproportionately impacted developing countries, leading to environmental and [societal impacts](#) all around the globe.

"Harmful subsidies often lead to a fishing fleet being able to go out fishing even if [the fishing] isn't profitable," said Anna Schuhbauer, author of the study and postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries. "And these vessels can go wherever they want—they can go to other countries, other economic zones. And so, we were really interested in the impact of these subsidies on the countries where these boats actually fish."

Harmful fisheries subsidies are any direct or indirect financial contribution by a government to a private sector that increases the revenue, or lowers the cost, of fishing. Fuel subsidies, tax exemptions, support for vessel construction, investment in marketing and processing infrastructure—by altering the economics of fishing in these ways, harmful subsidies can encourage unsustainable fishing capacities that exponentially increase the risk of exploitation.

In 2018, an estimated \$22.2 billion in harmful fisheries subsidies were

provided to the world's fishing fleets. Of this, some \$5.3 billion were likely to support fishing in foreign waters and within the exclusive economic zones of foreign nations, and \$1 billion supported fishing in the high seas. These numbers mean that the benefits, and the resulting environmental and societal costs, of these subsidies are not equally distributed across the places these fishing vessels go to.

"What we're finding out is that harmful fishing subsidies create more inequities in places where the coastal communities are already marginalized," said Schuhbauer. "You have coastal communities that are already disadvantaged over the big industrial fisheries because the government doesn't really pay too much attention to them."

"And we're not saying that the small-scale [fishing fleet](#) should get more subsidies, but maybe the harmful subsidies should be taken away and instead, provided as beneficial subsidies. Maybe for community-based projects or just generally for fisheries management for both industrial and small-scale fleets," Schuhbauer said.

Local fishing suffers when big boats, harmfully subsidized, take all the fish and livelihood opportunities away from local fishers. Food insecurity becomes an issue as well, especially for communities heavily reliant on day-to-day subsistence fishing. Artificially created jobs lead to an economy falsely dependent on fishing, where the government does not support creating different, sustainable livelihood opportunities.

"Both current and future generations of marginalized communities in the Global South are heavily impacted by harmful fisheries subsidies," said Rashid Sumaila, University Killam Professor and Canada Research Chair at the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries. "There is a huge opportunity cost when limited public resources are used to subsidize overfishing because the same resources are not available to tackle some of the big challenges facing these communities such as building and

running community health centers, and schools."

"Secondly, because such subsidies lead to overcapacity and overfishing not only by local but also subsidized vessels of distant water fishing nations, they literally take food out the mouth of both current and [future generations](#) of these communities."

The ecological impact of these harmful fisheries is also great, and should not be underestimated. Instead of addressing the lack of fish in domestic waters, harmful subsidies allow fishing vessels to deplete fish stocks in other countries' waters.

"Harmful fisheries subsidies can have many serious impacts," said Daniel Skerritt, lead author of the study and a former postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, who is now with Oceana. "Our previous research, and that of colleagues all over the world, have shown how they can distort markets and contribute to unfair trade practices, lead to higher CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by making fuel cheaper, and ultimately increase the risk of overfishing."

Over 20 years ago, the world community recognized how harmful fisheries subsidies were destructive to [fish stocks](#) and fishing communities, and asked the World Trade Organization (WTO) to address these issues.

"The mandate was to work collaboratively with countries worldwide to discipline them," said Sumaila. "The WTO reached an agreement in June 2022 to help reduce these subsidies. At the moment, some commentators have found the agreement wanting."

The WTO struck a deal in June last year that partially banned provision of fisheries subsidies, but only to illegal fishing and fishing on overfished stocks. WTO Members will be meeting again in February

2025 to negotiate the parts of the deal that were not included, including the prohibition of all harmful subsidies.

"This is what most voices in the scientific community are in support of," said Skerritt. "The alternative is to provide support that actively works to increase sustainability and equitability in fisheries, particularly in shared fisheries."

The paper is published in the journal *Marine Policy*.

**More information:** Daniel J. Skerritt et al, Mapping the unjust global distribution of harmful fisheries subsidies, *Marine Policy* (2023). DOI: [10.1016/j.marpol.2023.105611](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2023.105611)

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